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The open stage is discussed both as architecture and as part of a new theatrical style. In reference to use of the open stage, emphasis is given to specifics with which the director must deal, to special problems of the actor, to the approach to blocking a play, and to the open stage as "theatrical experience". The architectural advantage of the open stage is also discussed. (FS)

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DIRECTOR, PLATFORM and AUDIENCE

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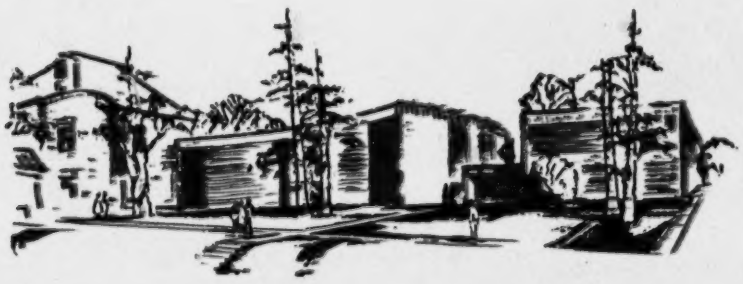

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Richard D. Meyer is the Director of Theatre at Grinnell College. He has produced for community theatre and summer stock, as well as educational theatre, and has had extensive experience in directing traditional plays and new scripts upon an open stage. His articles have appeared in *Theatre Arts, Western Humanities Review, American Educational Theatre Association Journal* and *Players.* He spent the 1962-63 year with the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre, contributing a chapter to its commemorative volume, *Theatre: Volume II.* He is now at work on a documentation of the beginnings of the Repertory Theatre and an analysis of Arthur Miller and his writings.

During the summer of 1966, Mr. Meyer was guest director of the Tent Theatre at the Southwest Missouri State College and during the season of 1963-64 he was assistant to Elia Kazan at the Lincoln Center Repertory Theatre. His theatrical experience, dating back to 1946, includes the direction of forty major productions, technical direction of thirty-five productions, and teaching of all standard theatre courses.

He is a member of the following professional organizations: American Educational Theatre Association, American National Theatre and Academy, United States Institute of Theatre Technology, Speech Association of America, Central States Speech Association and the Grinnel Art Association (board member).

The open stage has been a growing issue for about ten years now, much discussed both as architecture and as part of a new theatrical style. Of course, the open stage concept itself is not new, for all stages were open until the convention of the proscenium arch was adopted less than 200 years ago — a short span, in the history of drama. But since that time, the proscenium stage — and the realistic approach to drama which grew and thrived on it — have become so deeply ingrained in our dramatic thinking that such a stage has begun to be taken for granted as the proper setting for any play. It does not seem incongruous to see *Oedipus Rex* or *Macbeth* played there.

Now, the open stage *seems* new, and the current dialogue on its value generally falls into two familiar camps — the liberal and the conservative. The liberals see in the open stage a relief from the psychological and physical confinement of the proscenium stage which has brought us to today's crass commercialism; they hope for a surge forward into a bold new world of theatrical expression. The conservatives, on the other hand, are concerned for the world of theatrical expression that we leave behind; they see the open stage as a reckless plunge into a future that cannot effectively produce Ibsen, Shaw, O'Neill, or even Inge. I am speaking of the extremes, of course, for there are voices in the middle. And there are compromise theatres — theatres that can be converted from one form to another in order to combine the advantages of both forms. But, since we are concerned here with the open stage concept, I am going to speak for other directors like myself who pursue our craft on stages which are once and forever open and do not convert.

Theory vs. practice

From this point of view, I want to consider the open stage not as a philosophy, but as a platform, in an effort to distinguish between the real and imaginary benefits it offers to the director. Leonard B. Meyer of the University of Chicago, author of several books on aesthetics, has said that the contemporary arts in America are in a unique position in which, for the first time in history, theory is ahead of practice. Those who make a business of being alert to what is "in" are so quick to identify a trend, evaluate it, debate its causes and effects — that is, "categorize" it — that the artist is left in the self-conscious position of creating a work that is catalogued before it is completed, knowing full well that his public image — his prestige and likely his income — will follow accordingly. That is, of course, a generalization, but it does have a basis.

To a large extent, the same thing has happened to the open stage. A trend had begun to develop, but while it was still young, while the directors were only beginning to verbalize their frustrations with what was, and their conjectures about what ought to be, the critics adopted the cause and began to expand it into a philosophy. Before long, producers sympathized with the director's frustrations, and forward-thinking community theatre boards and university business offices across the country were agreeing to trade in their passé proscenium arches for the *avant garde* open stage.

We directors, as a whole, were grateful. We had started the idea and we were glad to see it roll. Still, as a group, we were caught a little unawares. Like most fights for freedom, the battle had begun with a negative approach — the primary objective was to move *away* from something rather than *toward* something — at least, toward something *specific*. We wanted loose from the picture frame; we wanted to break down the barrier between the actor and the audience; we wanted to be freed from the conventions that constricted us both technically and stylistically.

The director gets a stage

Some directors, and some dramatists, didn't wait for the new theatres to release them from whatever shackles most disturbed them. They found that release themselves in a variety of ways. Kazan escaped the proscenium arch with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, when he pushed both the set and the action out onto an improvised extension of the stage. O'Neill didn't feel bound by the current convention of realism or naturalism when he wrote *The Great God Brown*, nor did Wilder with *Our Town* or *Skin of Our Teeth*. Olson and Johnson certainly bridged the gap between performer and audience in *Hellzapoppin* — although it is unlikely that the latter two will ever be honored for any great aesthetic advances in the American Theatre. The point is, however, that these were all dynamic men independently surmounting the obstacles that bothered them, without any help from architects or theatre consultants. Had these same men, on the other hand, been invited to sit down at a conference table and agree upon the future — even the *limited* future — of modern drama and what kind of quarters it would require, they couldn't have agreed on the shape of a make-up table, much less a stage.

That stage did get designed, however. So now we directors, each with a different approach to staging, a different taste in

scripts, a different style of presentation, have our new stages — not all alike in dimensions, but alike in that the artificial barrier of the arch is gone and the audience wraps, to one degree or another, around the stage. We recognize that we have a different relationship between the actor and the audience. We know we have intimacy, involvement, a new third dimension to work with, plasticity, new horizons, and a brand new kind of excitement. But these are all intangibles. What we do not have is a precedent for realizing these abstract advantages in terms of our concrete materials. With very real actors and sets, we must transmit these qualities so that they can be perceived by the audience through the two senses of sight and sound. In the past, there have been basic rules of staging on which we could rely — or which we could reject if we chose — but we knew so well these conventions of composition and blocking, of motivation, of illusion, that we usually did not need to attend to them consciously. They were the skill upon which the art was based. They were good habits that facilitated our creation of something beyond mere technique.

But now, the rules no longer apply, and so we are all *experimenters* on stages that cost anywhere from 80 thousand to nine million dollars, while the backers and the public at large look at us and say, "All right, you've got it — now *use* it!" Under these conditions, even the giants falter. Kazan was soundly scolded by the critics for failing to *use* Lincoln Center's open stage. On the other hand, Guthrie, who certainly came to his Minneapolis stage with more open stage experience than any of us, is accused of *using his too much*, for being excessively theatrical, gaudy. Both comments seem to me beside the point, and the argument is reminiscent of the debate over whether *Death of a Salesman* is true tragedy.

This arouses the question of whether the director is obligated to *use* a stage, whatever kind it is. My own reaction is that categorizing should be left to the critics and the philosophers — that's *their* problem. As directors, our first obligation is to stage the best performance possible. I don't mean that we ignore the new shape of our platform, though. The open stage is now one of our materials, and the sooner we become acquainted with its unfamiliar qualities, the sooner we recognize its drawbacks as well as its possibilities, the sooner we will be able to *depend upon it* to enhance our productions.

The stage in use

Let us look, then, at some of the specifics with which the director must deal. Basic to them all is the fact that *more* of the audience is *closer* to the stage. Most new stages eliminate the orchestra pit, consequently, the distance between the first row and the downstage playing area is considerably reduced. Furthermore, these front rows are not only closer, but they are longer. The audience that once sat at the back of the hall has now been brought forward to the sides of the thrust, doubling the number who see the actors at close range. And half of these people in the front rows are viewing the stage from an oblique angle, creating a problem of sightlines. The audience in the right or left sections sees the actor not against the back wall, as we are accustomed to do, but against the side of the stage or some portion of the audience.

The set, which no longer encloses the playing area, becomes a more complex design problem; the arrangement of scenery seen by the audience on the left will be quite different from that seen by the audience on the right or in the center. Conventional box sets are in conflict with the spirit, and often the structure, of the new stage. Of course, there are countless ways to compensate — three-dimensional forms, projected scenery, platform arrangements, and so forth. The increased use of new approaches to scene design is to be celebrated — but there are times when the inevitable loss of traditional illusion is felt. Most of our dramatic literature is still being written with the realistic box set in mind. There are a number of plays which depend very strongly upon the clear definition of interior as opposed to exterior, for instance. Take *The Diary of Anne Frank*. In this case, the climax comes when the Jewish family, hidden in the attic, hears the approaching footsteps of the Nazis on the stairs. A threatening "outside" must have a definite character, as opposed to an enclosed "inside" that implies protection and at least the hope of safety. The impact of the scene is reduced when it is played in an obviously open area. There may come a day when such open-ness will bother us no more than the lack of a fourth wall on a conventional set — most people are not even aware that an imaginative leap is required. But, for the time being, we are still attuned psychologically *not* to feel confinement or concealment unless we see a visible boundary, just as we do not sense cool-ness when we look at red. It may be the result of cultural training or the result of body chemistry, but we do have what seem to be innate reactions toward bold colors as opposed to pastels, a fast tempo as opposed to a slow one, cluttered space as opposed to bare or ordered space. These instincts are part of a universal language upon which nonverbal communication is based. Now, to return to Anne Frank on an open stage, we can count upon the audience's imagination to work a great deal harder than is usually demanded of it. But, as directors aware of this new loss of traditional illusion, we will help to compensate by calling upon lighting or other effects to clarify a setting or intensify an atmosphere that may otherwise seem ill-defined.

The actor on the open stage

We must also be aware of the special problems of the actor. Because he is closer to a larger part of his audience, he must be better costumed and more subtly made up. But more important than the actor's appearance is the actor's behavior. In spite of the intimacy that comes from the close and unseparated audience, there is a tendency for the actor on stage to appear bigger than life. He is accented, and must perform with total authority. Those of us who work with amateur casts become aware of the increased exposure of the actor and the impossibility of concealing a poor performer. Those devices of allowing a weak character to blend into the scenery, or of placing an awkward actor behind a set piece, no longer work as well. Every actor is called upon for a more convincing performance. At close range, every muscle counts Indeed, every muscle *must* count on the open stage. Since much of the action will be played with the actor's back to some segment of the audience, the director must demand — even more than we did before — that the actor act with his whole body; what the audience does not see on his face, they must recognize in his posture, his hands, the muscles of his back. Extra demands must also be made upon the actor's voice; even in a theatre with excellent acoustics, there is the dan-

ger of lost lines. Now this excellence in performance is, of course, hoped for in any actor on any stage, but it takes on added importance on the open stage simply because its lack is more noticeable and more distracting.

Blocking for the third dimension

The close, wrap-around audience must also affect our approach to blocking a play. The basic problem is again that of sightlines. As directors, we must divide the audience into three parts — right, left and center. By viewing rehearsals from each position, we become aware of the variation in pictorialization of any one scene is observed from different seats in the house. We will take care that no segment of the audience is slighted, having its patience tested too often or too long by an actor's back or a blocked view. As in the arena theatre, any confrontation between characters which are played upon the forestage will not be seen by a significant portion of the audience. The solution is most frequently found in two ways. Major scenes may be moved to the upstage area, although there will be a loss of the immediacy which is one of the major values of the open stage. Or the solution may come in movement, maintaining a fluidity of action that prevents any one section of the audience from extended periods in a poor vantage point. Here again, there is an attendant danger that, unless such movement is sensitively controlled, the effect will be one of unmotivated, erratic shifting. Over-use of the first solution — moving the action upstage — results in an essentially proscenium performance that denies all the benefits of the new form.

As directors, we apply both techniques and strive to avoid either extreme. José Quintero, a director of remarkable sensitivity combined with long experience on non-proscenium stages, applies the belief that upstage, the area farthest from the audience, should be used for the initial statement. which will then be broken into components for closer inspection on the forestage The most obvious application of his theory could be seen in the procession of characters which opened the prologue of Lincoln Center's *Marco Millions*. Entering upstage right and progressing across the rear of the platform, they presented to the audience a general, colorful, over-all view of the characters involved in the action to come. Only as they continued their circular pattern around the front of the stage did they begin to appear as separate individuals, one with a beard, one with red gloves, one carrying a baby.

The generally larger playing area of the open stage which makes such pageantry possible also has its drawbacks. For instance, the protracted entrances and exists which heighten the effectiveness of a procession may destroy the impact of a sudden dramatic exit. The actor stalks boldly out of the circle of light, but must continue to make an essentially weak departure through the shadows. When we, as directors, anticipate this problem. we either position his climactic scene accordingly, or we direct his exit so that, by posture or gait or gesture or the addition of some appropriate business, his long walk across the stage enriches the desired mood rather than dissipates it.

The striking advantage of the open stage is the plasticity it offers with its added depth. Traditional staging, with its linear movement against a flat background, seems shallow compared to the three-dimensional flow possible on the open stage. Most of the new stages offer vomitories, as well as additional upstage entrances. The result, if they are used, is an increase in front-to-back movement to complement the familiar side-to-side movement. This not only brings aesthetic variety, but may produce positive and necessary psychological effects. I was never so aware of the very real difference and the significance of such effects until I saw the play *After the Fall* on both the open and proscenium stage. On the open stage, Quentin's memory figures always entered from the rear — sometimes slowly, and sometimes abruptly — but always carrying the conviction that they emerged from the recesses of his past, the depths of his consciousness. The movement itself helped create the mood of intense and sometimes painful internal probing that is the very nature of the play. As contrasted to this, the play on its national tour was staged on proscenium stages, with the entrances of the memory figures being made from stage right or stage left. The effect now was not that the memories were called forth or burst forth into the present, but that they were passing — sometimes almost fleeting — and, on the whole, less disturbing. Obviously, the essence of the play was profoundly affected.

Now, it should be said here that the director, on any stage, is called upon to solve problems. With the use of light. levels, focus of attention, almost any play can be performed almost any place and. if it is well-mounted, it can convey the intended mood and message. With increased familiarity with the character of our particular "place", we reduce the possibility of its inadvertent and unnecessary misuse.

The open stage as "theatrical experience"

But, as directors, we are concerned with something more than simply avoiding misuse of a stage. Real achievement comes with a performance that is so compelling that the audience gives no thought to its physical surroundings. The audience has what we call a "theatrical experience". As to whether such a thing exists, *yes*. Those "magic moments" recalled in theatrical memoirs really did occur. The audience that left the theatre where Laurette Taylor was playing in *The Glass Menagerie* had been part of one. So had the audience who left *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a silent, shocked mass. Yet, on the other hand, when an audience leaves a theatre as six hundred separate, chattering people wondering whether to go to Lindy's for cheesecake or Sardi's for scotch, there probably has *not* been a theatrical experience.

What makes the difference is not a given, predictable ratio of dramatic content to excellence of performance, but the fact — for any number of reasons — that the audience has ceased to be *passive*. I am not going to spend time reiterating all that has been said about the modern audience composed of intellectual snobs or tired expense-account executives, but the truth is that the present-day theatregoer does arrive in one of two mental states. The first can best be expressed as, "I'm here." By the time he is seated, he has completed all his responsibilities for the evening — he has battled the traffic, met his companions at the proper hour, paid a high price for his tickets, gulped his dinner and managed to get into the theatre before the lights dim. He feels he has done *his* part. The other mental

attitude is that of "Show me." He wants it to be proven to him that his money and effort have been well-spent and he will receive his full share of entertainment or intellectual titilation. Or else he wants to match critical wits with his friends and the reviewers. In either case, he exhibits a greater degree of anticipation than the I'm-here-man. Still, the Show-me-man is no more ready to contribute to the evening. His goal is not involvement, but detachment — a cool, observant eye to *judge* with.

Both groups are basically unreceptive. It *is possible* to capture both of them in an absorbing production and sweep them upwards toward some overwhelming universal truth that they did not expect, so that they will all leave the theatre a little different people from the people they were when they entered. But because there is so much inertia or real resistance to overcome, the chances are slim.

Now, can the open stage improve the odds? I think to some degree it can — partly just because it is new, but also partly because of certain identifiable qualities inherent in it. This is not to say that it *will*, please notice, but that it *can*. I think the most vivid illustration I ever saw of the new possibilities in audience-actor relationships growing out of a physical setting occurred in a theatre which was not even a theatre, with a stage that was not even a stage. It was an upstairs room in Greenwich Village known as St. Mark's Theatre, where a play called *The Blacks* was showing. And the theatrical experience that occurred there was not just the result of the shock of the script or the forcefulness of the performance, because the experience began *before* the play did. To get to St. Mark's you walk down an insignificant street — it's not good old bright Broadway — and you turn in a drab doorway and climb even drabber steps. In a small and unimpressive hallway you hand your coat to a girl who appears to throw it in a closet rather than hang it in a coat check room. You glance through an open door to the auditorium — a bare room with risers and folding chairs against two walls facing a sparsely decorated playing area. The point I am making is, the ritual of theatre-going has been upset, leaving you a little exposed, a little apprehensive and a little excited. So by the time you pay for the ticket and go through that door, you are not so sure that your responsibilities for the evening's success or failure are completed. You are *not* just the back of one more head soon to be faded into dark anonymity; your face can be seen by the actors as well as by half the audience and, like it or not, you are part of the event taking place and *you know it*. You are on the way to a "theatrical experience."

Now, this does not necessarily mean, of course, that the experience must follow. Countless shows less effective than *The Blacks* open in similar quarters under similar conditions, and what follows is not total absorption but distraction by the faces of the audience across from you, irritation at an actor's lost line, an increasing awareness that your folding chair is very hard, and the realization that you would have done better to have lingered over your after-dinner coffee.

The architectural advantage

What I am suggesting is that the physical setting of the theatre building itself does condition the audience in one way or another in regard to the play. A mood of expectation exists at the ANTA Washington Square theatre. The audience enters what looks like a simple pre-fab structure, passes through a small, congested hall, and finds itself at the top of a steeply-raked amphitheatre facing a stage that juts out into its midst. Gravity itself seems to press the audience forward toward that three-sided stage in the center, with no suggestion of protection — either protection for the viewer from the action or emotion that will take place upon the stage, or protection for the performer from whatever responses he provokes in the audience. The same is true of the Vivian Beaumont Theatre or the Guthrie Theatre, although on an even grander scale. All attention is focused on the stage. The result is not only an emotional elevation of the actor and the action on the stage, but an accompanying anticipation of this elevation by the audience. There is a pre-disposition to consider the events that unfold there not as fragments of the here-and-now but as intimations of eternity. What all this suggests is a paradox. The abandoning of the aesthetic distance established by the proscenium arch leaves us with an air of intimacy, which implies subtlety and understatement in performance; but the bold direction of attention from the audience area to the stage implies that what happens on the platform is bigger than life, more meaningful, more likely to be symbolic than simple.

The theatre-goer may come to the open stage in a mood of excitement, willing to share in a way that is new to him; his hopes for a theatrical experience are intensified. But this same intensified hope may make his disappointment more acute if the theatrical experience fails to materialize.

Using the advantage

To make success more likely, we approach directing on the open stage on several levels. We try to foresee the disadvantages in order to avoid them. We recognize the technical problems of

mounting the play that affect make-up and costuming, sets, blocking, voice projection, and so forth. Then we deal with the psychological problems, especially those that affect the audience. We make sure that they not only hear and see the actors, but that they also reap the positive benefits of their new relation to the stage. We must continue to grope for new ways to minimize the distraction that may come from their self-consciousness and encourage their enthusiasm for this new form. We may send costumed trumpeters into the lobby to herald the show, as they do at the Guthrie Theatre, to express our shared expectancy of something memorable. We may send an actor out to do a witty elaboration upon the fire law announcement, as they did at Lincoln Center, so that the players and the audience all step together into the evening's illusion. During the play itself we may bring a crowd of players down an aisle, or we may have a character communicate directly with the audience, if the script permits. (And, hopefully, we will begin to have more and more scripts that do permit some sort of overt exchange.)

In other words, beyond the efforts we have always made to produce fine performances, we are searching for ways to express that: theatre on the open stage is based on this premise. We no longer say, "We will pretend, while you sit there and believe." Now we say, "Let's explore this thing together. We'll do our part and you do yours, but whatever human purpose it is that theatre serves, let's serve it together."